

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE

Washington, D.C.

As of June 20, 2016

Letter is still open for signatures

Dear Senator,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious and secular leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners to urge you to cosponsor and support swift passage of S. 2878, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act.

While we hold an extremely broad diversity of theological views and political positions, we all agree on the importance of international religious freedom. It strengthens cultures and provides the foundation for stable democracies and their components, including civil society, economic growth, and social harmony. As such, it is also a counter-terrorism weapon as it preemptively undermines religious extremism. From Cyrus' Cylinder to Roger Williams' 1663 Colonial Charter, history and modern scholarship make it clear that where people are allowed to practice their faith freely, they are less likely to be alienated from the government, and more likely to be good citizens.

We believe S. 2878 strengthens IRFA at a critical time when assaults on religious freedom around the world are systemic and growing. In fact, the current state of international religious freedom is one of deepening crisis—according to the Pew Research Center's latest annual study on global restrictions on religion, 77% of the world's population live in countries with a high or very high overall level of restriction on religion in 2013, up from 76% in 2012 and 68% in 2007.

We must work to create a context where people can peacefully live with their deepest differences. The turmoil and bloodshed in Syria, Iraq and Nigeria—including the Islamic State's genocide against Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims, Turkmen (Shia), Shabak and others—offers the latest examples of what happens if we do not.

The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, introduced by Senator Marco Rubio and (lead Democrat will be added soon), would:

- Give the Administration and the State Department new political tools, strengthen the standing of the International Religious Freedom Office and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom by making clear that the Ambassador reports directly to the Secretary of State.
- Clarify the Ambassador-at-Large's role in distributing project grants to protect religious freedom globally.
- Create a "Special Watch List" and automatic downgrade to a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for states on the list for three straight years.
- Clarify that CPC designations will occur annually.
- Require designation of non-state actors as "Entities of Particular Concern."

- Direct the President to focus sanctions on individuals who carry out or order religious restrictions.
- Set a floor at 25 full-time employees in the International Religious Freedom Office.
- Require curriculum for training all Foreign Service Officers in the “strategic value of international religious freedom.”
- Prioritize IRF programming for groups that seek to strengthen investigations, reporting, and monitoring of religious freedom violations, including genocide.

This legislation is the companion bill to the amended text of H.R. 1150, sponsored by Representatives Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Anna Eshoo (D-CA), which passed out of the House by voice vote on May 16.

The passage and implementation of S. 2878 will result in a strengthened IRFA, as well the integration of this foundational human right into U.S. foreign policy and national security strategies. In so doing, the United States will send a clear and urgent message regarding the inherent dignity of every human being, while advancing global security in the fight against persecution, religious extremism and terrorism. This legislation is consistent with the best of our values, and has the added benefit of practically protecting our national interests as well.

We urge you to cosponsor this legislation and press for its swift passage. Thank you.

Respectfully,

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AHMADIYYA MUSLIM COMMUNITY USA

AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

AMERICAN ISLAMIC CONGRESS

AMERICANS FOR DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS IN BAHRAIN (ADHRB)

BOAT PEOPLE SOS

CENTER FOR INQUIRY

CENTER FOR ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (CIRF)

CENTER FOR PLURALISM

CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE - UK

CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY NATIONAL AFFAIRS OFFICE

COALITION FOR A FREE AND DEMOCRATIC VIETNAM

COMMON GROUND CHRISTIAN NETWORK

FEDERATION OF INDIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS (FIACONA)

INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

INTERNATIONAL OFFICE OF CHAMPA

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ASSOCIATION

JUBILEE CAMPAIGN USA

KHMER KROM FOUNDATION

MONTAGNARD HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION

NINEVEH COUNCIL OF AMERICA

NORTH AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ASSOCIATION

POPULAR BLOC OF CAO DAI RELIGION - OVERSEAS REPRESENTATIVE OFFICE

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